



MARTHA COAKLEY  
ATTORNEY GENERAL

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS  
OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL  
ONE ASHBURTON PLACE  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02108

(617) 727-2200  
(617) 727-4765 TTY  
[www.mass.gov/ago](http://www.mass.gov/ago)

**Testimony of Attorney General Martha Coakley  
Joint Committee on Education  
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Good morning Chairwoman Chang-Diaz, Chairwoman Peisch, and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to testify about one of the most difficult challenges we face today to protect our kids – combating bullying and cyber-bullying.

The prevalence of this problem will not be a surprise to anyone in this room. A recent study by the Department of Public Health found that *one in four* Massachusetts middle schoolers have been bullied at school. And with the growth of the Internet and social media, the impact of these individual bullying incidents has never been greater. Where once when we were growing up, a young child could leave a bully behind at the schoolyard, those taunts and harassment can now affect them 24-7 online. The tragic cases of Phoebe Prince and Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover remind us every day about the importance of tackling this issue. But the challenge goes well beyond just those two cases.

We know that bullying can have short-term and long-term effects on a wide-range of our students that impact their self-esteem, their performance at school, and can often lead to other related acts of violence. When we take all of these bullying incidents together, they impact a schools' overall ability to foster a positive learning environment and our children's ability to reach their true potential.

The Legislature last year took a major step to address this issue by passing the landmark bullying prevention law. By requiring strong bullying prevention and education efforts in our schools, it sent a strong message that our Commonwealth will no longer tolerate a culture that allows for the constant harassment of our children.

I commend the members of this committee and your Legislative colleagues for your efforts on the new law. The new law was a major step forward, but we believe there is more left to be done to ensure that it is working effectively. As part of the new anti-bullying law, the Legislature established a special Commission chaired by our Office to review the General Laws to determine whether additional changes should be made. Our commission took this charge extremely seriously.

We met with numerous experts and held two public hearings in Boston and Springfield to solicit input. We heard from a wide-range of perspectives – including teachers, school

administrators, academics, parent groups, and students themselves. In June of this year, we filed our Report that outlined seven recommendations that we hope the Legislature will consider. As part of that Report, we also submitted legislation that was docketed as the bill before you today, H.B. 3584. The legislation would codify three of the Commission's recommendations, and I would like to discuss those recommendations with you briefly now.

The first piece of the legislation would establish a state-wide reporting mechanism to collect data from schools regarding incidents of bullying. The need for this reporting mechanism was a common theme to the testimony we heard, and we believe it is a common-sense next step to measure the effectiveness of the new law and ensure compliance by our schools. The data would be broken down by categories such as race and ethnicity, sex, religion, sexual orientation and disability and be submitted to the Department of Secondary and Elementary Education on a yearly basis. This would provide a valuable tool for identifying trends, tailoring bullying prevention efforts, and focusing resources where they are most needed. We don't believe this will be a significant added burden to our schools as it would mirror currently existing federal and state reporting requirements. We also believe that the DESE should be given ample authority to develop the specific reporting requirements to ensure that they are most effective and work with experts to ensure accurate reporting and incentive to report.

The Commission also heard extensive testimony that certain groups of students are more vulnerable to becoming the targets of bullying based on actual or perceived characteristics. We heard of the overwhelming prevalence of harassment against students based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and the resulting physical and mental health impact on those students. The Commission also heard testimony regarding the vulnerability of students with disabilities. Although school districts have been encouraged by DESE to address these specific categories of students in their Bullying Prevention Plans, some schools have not adopted this as a priority. In the legislation before you, we recommend that schools' bullying prevention plans be required to include a statement recognizing the vulnerability to bullying by certain enumerated categories of students as well as a commitment to creating a safe, supportive environment for these vulnerable populations.

The Commission is committed to the success of the bullying law and many members have already voluntarily agreed to meet again in November to hear from those on the front lines – including our teachers and principals. So we ask if you wish to extend the term of our Commission for two years to continue to gather facts and information and make additional recommendations to the Legislature when appropriate.

In short, while we do not lack in the number of challenges we face to combat incidents of bullying, we also fortunately do not lack in the commitment shared by all those involved to work to address it.

I want to commend the Governor and Legislature for your work in passing the anti-bullying law, and also commend the ongoing efforts of DESE and our school systems to implement it. We believe the recommendations offered in the legislation before you today are the common-sense next steps to that landmark anti-bullying law as we continue this critical work to protect our children. We urge the committee to report the bill out favorably.

Thank you.

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